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XXIV.—A DEFINITION OF *PETRARCHISMO*.

While the origin, sources, and evolution of the drama of the sixteenth century have been elaborately studied, curiously enough the non-dramatic literature of the period has suffered from comparative neglect. Monographs on single authors, studies on English literature alone, in many cases have erred thru false perspective. Thus, altho the time is not yet ripe for the general history of the sonnet, desired by M. Vaganay,¹ it may be profitable briefly to consider English literature, in one of its phases, in relation to the great movement of which it was a part.

At the opening of the sixteenth century the English language was in a state of transition. Two important modifications were taking place; first, the final *e* was no longer pronounced; and, secondly, the *en* was no longer used for the plurals of verbs. Ellis² dates the loss of the first from the middle of the preceding century. Professor Skeat³ places it even earlier: "About A. D. 1400 the sound of final *e*, already lost in the north, was lost in the midland dialect also." Consequently Professor Saintsbury⁴ concludes: "the poetry was in a pitiable state of eclipse and disorganization, and the language was still in a process of formation." It is this condition which explains Ascham's petulance:⁵ "As for ye Latin or greke tongue, euery thing is so excellently done in them, that none can do better: In the Englysh tongue on the contrary,

¹ Hugues Vaganay, *Le Sonnet en Italie et en France*, Fasc. II, p. xvi.

² Ellis, *Early English Pronunciation*, 1, 405.

³ Skeat, *Principles of English Etymology*, First Series, p. 331.

⁴ Saintsbury, *The Earlier Renaissance*, p. 15.

⁵ Ascham, *Toxophilus*, Arber's reprint, p. 18.

euery thinge in a maner so meanly, both for the matter and the handelynge, that no man can do worse."

This change in the language especially affected poetry. In 1400 England had had one writer who was both a great poet and a great master of verse-technique. In 1500 his poems were no longer available as models. In Professor Lounsbury's¹ phrasing: "The dropping of this one vowel was a main cause of the ruin that overtook the metre. The forgetfulness of the fact that it had once been sounded was the chief reason why for so long a period the measure failed to be restored." Direct evidence to this effect is given by Skelton:²

"In Chaucer I am sped,
His tales I have red :
His mater is delectable,
Solacious, and commendable ; . . .
At those dayes moch commended,
And now men wold haue amended
His Englysh, whereat they barke,
And mar all they warke."

That Chaucer's matter was "delectable" is shown by the eight³ editions before 1600, and by innumerable references to his tales; that his poetry is lost is shown equally by the omission of his name in such a poem as Drayton's⁴ "To Himself and the Harp." Indirectly, the same point is proved by such poems as the "Court of Love." Professor Skeat⁵ has shown definitely, I think, that they are consciously archaic experiments, attempting to follow Chaucer in a non-Chaucerian age and in a non-Chaucerian language. As such, they were foredoomed to failure.

¹ Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, I, 251.

² Skelton, ed. Dyce, I, 88.

³ Lounsbury, *Chaucer*, I, 265.

⁴ Drayton's Odes, *English Garner*, p. 529.

⁵ Skeat, *Supplementary Volume to Chaucer*, p. 409.

The failure was the more obvious since the court-life demanded poetry. As Henry the Seventh was practically an usurper, the first two Tudors had a *parvenue* court; the great ambition of both father and son was to establish their dynasty. This ambition, to be considered in the concert of Europe, explains so many of Henry the Eighth's political extravagances, his gorgeousness and love of display. But like every *nouveau riche*, he desired the environment of culture. For this, such poetry as that of Skelton, vigorous tho' it was, was unsuited. For such a court, the Skeltonian poem failed.

The natural solution was to turn to the classics. Humanism was at the flow, the great Latin and Greek poets were accessible thru such publications as the Aldine imprints, and to a certain number of writers, there the way seemed to lie. It is this which in an analogous situation is advocated by Du Bellay, and the project is so plausible that in England for a hundred years it was attempted. All of us know Harvey's arguments, and all of us know Stanyhurst's failure. Yet, remembering Mr. Robert Bridges, remembering Kingsley, and Clough, and Longfellow, and Swinburne, it is not fair to denominate this solution a failure. But for that century, at least, it was not a success. The Augustan court differed too radically from 16th century England to make adaptation easy, and the principle of Latin prosody, quantity, is too unlike the accentual system of English verse to be easily acclimatized. Consequently, in spite of numerous attempts, the humanistic impulse was not the main factor in Tudor poetry.

After this, but one other way lay open—to seek models in modern literatures. Of these, the Italian most naturally suggested itself, since the Cinquecento was the flour-

ishing time of the Italian Renaissance in politics, art, and literature. Nor was the opportunity lacking. One of the concomitants of this provincial feeling on the part of the English people was an interest in and a respect for Italian. Ascham¹ tells us that Italian translations were sold in every bookshop in London, that² "men have in more reverence the triumphs of Petrarch, than the Genesis of Moses." So far is this the case that it is a safe statement that he who does not know the literature of the Cinquecento does not, cannot, know the English literature of the sixteenth century.

The predominant characteristic of this Italian literature is its extreme intellectualism. This was due to the social conditions in the innumerable little courts. Like the French salons of the eighteenth century, they developed a type of mind, clever rather than deep, witty rather than profound. The Cortegiano of Castiglione thus resembles in tone the Letters of Lord Chesterfield. One finds a mass of *indovinelli*, poems if they may be called such, where the trick consists in meaning one thing while saying another, *I Motti* of Bembo, for example, or any of the *capitoli*, or the *Vendemmiatore* of Tansillo. A comment of Doni³ also illustrates this: "I once saw a hundred sonnets of Cornazzano, all in praise of eyes,—by my faith, it is a great thing to make so many rimes over a single object. Wherefore, for certain writing in manuscript and these works printed, he should be put among the number of gallant spirits of his age." The academies which sprang up in every principal city in Italy—Doni⁴ gives a list of seventeen—were really men-

¹ Ascham, *Scholemaster*, Arber's reprint, p. 79.

² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³ Doni, *La Libraria, In Vinegia*, 1557, p. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

tal gymnasiums. Any paradox that gave a play to the mental faculties was discussed. The Intronati of Siena,¹ for example, argue that he that loves not should be loved more than he that loves, that it is more harmful to do an injury than to receive it, that a woman should prefer an ugly man to a handsome one, etc. Lando, having written his *Paradossi*, promptly writes his *Confutazione*. It is merely an intellectual game.

With this trait of the literature must be considered a characteristic of the Italian life, its cynical immorality. To one who has read the *novelle*, the *Priapea* of Franco, the *Ragionamenti* of Aretino, the satires of Pietro Nelli, or the *Capitoli* of Berni, no further comment is necessary. To one familiar with the histories of the Italian families, the lives and crimes of the Borgia, Baglioni, d'Este, no more need be said. Yet, however unpleasant it is to discuss, it must never be forgotten that while the superstructure was platonic idealism, the foundation was cynical immorality.

Society in such a condition took upon itself to imitate the Petrarch of the *Canzoniere*. Actually the real and the ideal were poles apart. Whereas on the one side all conception of love had degenerated into gross sensuality,² on the other was upheld a love almost entirely of the spirit. For twenty years during the life of Laura and for ten years after her death, according to the story of the *Rime*, Petrarch humbly besought the favor of a lady, modest, chaste, and beautiful. This situation is set forth with minute analysis, in three hundred and seventeen sonnets, twenty-nine *canzoni*, nine *sestine*, seven *ballate*, and four *madrigali*.³ The series is divided into two parts.

¹ *Dieci Paradossi degli Accademici Intronati da Siena*, Milano, 1564.

² Cf. Graf, *Attraverso il Cinquecento*, Torino, 1888, p. 20.

³ This numeration follows Mestica's edition.

Whereas in the first part there are slight indications that the love is fleshly, in the second the love is entirely that of the spirit.

Obviously, imitations of Petrarch may follow along several general lines. The form of the two parts may be copied, or only the use of sonnets, varied by other lyrical verse-forms; or the substance may be copied without a strict adherence to the forms. For our purpose, however, the imitations may be grouped into two main classes: First, Petrarchism, where the author, carried away by his admiration, unconsciously and not servilely copies his master, or honestly translates him. In English, Wyatt is an example. Secondly, *Petrarchismo*, a foreign manner for which I retain the foreign name, an insincere literary fashion, where Petrarch figures only as the first of the type. Examples of this are any of the Elizabethan sonneteers. Only this last need concern us now—*Petrarchismo*. It is Graf, I think, who defines it as “art for art’s sake.” M. Piéri¹ explains it thus: “*Petrarchismo* is the art of treating cleverly and wittily matters of the heart, of composing love-poems without the emotion in the soul, of feigning passion for an imaginary mistress, and of singing a fiction of amorous intrigue, whose phases and whose stages are fixed, and, as it were, established by an immovable tradition. To succeed in this type our sixteenth-century poets needed only a little learning and imagination, a great deal of memory, and a certain ability in the art of composition.” As Cardinal Bembo was the great exemplar, the fashion is sometimes called *Bembismo*. But to make the matter still more complex, Angelo di Costanzo reacted, harked back to the Quattrocentisti, and developed the epigrammatic sonnet. Thus, from one

¹ Marius Piéri, *Pétrarque et Ronsard*, 1896, p. 268.

original Petrarch, there sprang, in the Cinquecento, a number of varying forms, all of them equally insincere.

But this insincerity can be pushed back, even to Petrarch himself. At Arqua, as an old man, he rewrote his poems, altering lines; so that the *Canzoniere* is rather a work of art than a record of objective fact. Finzi¹ thus summarizes the condition: "Commenced, one may say, with the ardor of a lover, continued with minute care through more than ten lusters, elaborated, corrected, arranged with the feeling of an artist, the *Canzoniere* is not a collection of historic and psychologic documents on the love of Petrarch for Laura. It is an elaboration, artistic, slow, and manifold, of the motive which dominated poetry for more than a century in Provence and Italy. On this *general* motive of art, the poet has grafted the *personal* motive of his love for Laura, melting the two elements into a work which, on account of its perfection, remains one and indivisible, and which cannot be discomposed so that they appear sharply distinct."

In the Cinquecento the natural effect of this conception was to divorce literature from life. Subject-matter, treatment, and vocabulary, all become purely conventional. The point is so important that I shall cite instances. Bembo himself writes a series of aspiring, idealizing sonnets to Morosina, who was known to be his mistress and the mother of his children. Laura Battiferra follows the fashion in addressing the beloved lady, notwithstanding the limitation of her sex, and the incumbrance of a husband. Ariosto ends a typically conventional sonnet by remarking frankly:² "All this is wonderful, truly.

¹ Guiseppe Finzi, *Pétrarque, Sa Vie et Son Œuvre*, Paris, 1906, p. 162.

² Ariosto, *Opere Minori*, I, sonnet xxii.

Tutto è mirabil certo. Nondimeno
Non starò ch'io non dica arditamente,
Che piu mirabil molto è la mia fede.

Nevertheless I am not sure that I do not say emphatically that much more wonderful is my faith." Sperone Speroni compiled a dictionary of Petrarch's phrases, in order that he might be certain to apply the correct adjective to the given noun. Tullia d'Aragona is both the author of and interlocutor in the *Dialogo della Infinità di Amore*¹ wherein is upheld the principle that "honest love, which is peculiar to noble men, those who have gentle and virtuous souls, whether they be rich or poor, is not born in desire as is the other, but in the reason, and has for its principal end to transform itself into the beloved object, with the hope that she be likewise transformed into him, so that from two they become one, or four; of this transformation have sung so many times and so pleasantly, thus Messer Francesco Petrarcha, thus the Right Reverend Cardinal Bembo; as one cannot experience it except spiritually, hence is it that in such loves no sentiments have place except the spiritual, that is, seeing, hearing, and still more, as being more spiritual, the imagination." And yet historically it is a fact that Tullia d'Aragona was a common prostitute, listed in the Tariff of Venice! Literary convention versus the actual fact!

So much for external evidence. Internal evidence tells the same tale. Necessarily one becomes suspicious when poet after poet bewails the same experience, in almost

¹ *Della Infinità Di Amore di Tullia d'Aragona.* Biblioteca Rara, xxix, p. 52. "L'amore onesto, il quale è proprio degli uomini nobili, cioè che hanno l'animo gentile, e virtuoso, qualunque essi siano o poveri, o ricchi, non è generato nel disiderio, come l'altro, ma dalla ragione, e ha per suo fine principale il trasformarsi nella cosa amata con disiderio che ella si trasformi in lui, tal che di due diventino un solo, o quattro; della qual trasformazione hanno favellato tante volte, e così leggiadramente sì messer Francesco Petrarcha, sì il reverendissimo cardinal Bembo; la quale perchè non si può fare se non spiritualmente, quinci è che in cotale amore non hanno luogo principalmente se non i sentimenti spirituali: ciò è il vedere, e l'udire, e più assai, come più spiritale, la fantasia."

identical terms, concerning ladies who differ only in their names. Consequently there are great types of sonnets, the "galley" sonnet, the cumulative sonnet, the negative sonnet, the sonnet comparing the lady to gems, to flowers,—all using the same conceits, the same metaphors, the same allegories. Obviously it is a literary manner, without objectivity.

This confused mass was passed on to England. Wyatt, traveling in Italy in 1526, and finding there similar court-life, brought back court-poetry. Wyatt not only translated from Petrarch, but also took a sonnet from Sannazaro.¹ Then, reënforced by Surrey, *Petrarchismo* started on its long career. As, however, the arrival of *Petrarchismo* in England antedated its arrival in France,² the authors of Tottel were subject to no French influence in their sonnets.

But this is not the case with the writers of the time of Elizabeth. The minority of Edward, and the turbulent reign of Mary, had so retarded the English development that *Petrarchismo* in the Pléiade was flourishing before the Elizabethans, who naturally turned to the nearest sources. But the Pléiade combined *Petrarchismo* with classical studies. The French, then, presents a new modification of the type. The old fidelity to one mistress is denied by the very titles; Ronsard has cycles to Marie and to Hélène. Platonism becomes more normal. De Baif is at times sensual. De Magny and Du Bellay use the sonnet form for elegies. They strike a new note.

But the two stages of sonneteering in England are alike in one particular, namely, that in neither case are the sonnets to be taken literally as a statement of objective

¹ Berdan, *Modern Language Notes*, February, 1908.

² Berdan, *Modern Language Review*, January, 1909.

fact, without careful study of external evidence. Historians have cited them as proofs, and the critics have proved by citing the historians, and the vicious circle rolls on. But when the sonnets are taken collectively, the fact is surely obvious. The greatest blow to the objective reality of these sonnet-cycles was Mr. Sidney Lee's publication of the Elizabethan cycles in one volume. Again it is but fair to acknowledge that even the prototype Laura is but a shadowy figure, suggested rather than described, her most marked characteristic being her golden hair. Yet, when of the sixteen cycles printed by Mr. Lee, thirteen state definitely that the hair of the lady is golden¹—the other three are simply non-committal—there is a surprising agreement either in poetic taste or in poetic conventionality. When, in addition, the same sonnet-forms appear, as in the Italian and French, it seems unnecessary to speculate on the identity of the lady, until her existence be proved.

Actually each sonnet presents an individual problem. As M. Vaganay² estimates at about two hundred thousand

¹ *Elizabethan Sonnets*, Sidney Lee, New York, n. d.

Sidney. "Gold is the covering of that stately place." Son. ix.

Daniel. "These amber locks are those same nets, my Dear." Son. vi.

Barnes. "In goldy locks." Son. xix.

Lodge. "And gold more pure than gold doth gild thy hair." Son. xvii.

Fletcher. "When as her hair (more worth, more pale, than gold)." Son. xxx.

Constable. "The crest was waves of gold." Son. x.

Daniel. "When Winter snows upon thy golden hairs." Son. xxxvii.

Anon. "The golden ceiling of thy brow's rich frame." Canz. 17.

Spenser. "If gold, her locks are finest gold on ground." Son. xv.

Griffin. "My lady's hair is threads of beaten gold." Son. xxxii.

R. L. "Her hair exceeds gold forced in smallest wire." Son. iii.

Smith. "Remembering her locks, of which the yellow hue

Made blush the beauties of the curled wire." Son. ix.

Tofte. "Then give me of thy hairs! which golden be." Pt. 1, xii.

² *Op. cit.*, Fasc. II, p. ix.

the number of sonnets composed between 1530 and 1565, no one knows or can remember the literature. There are then five possibilities:

First. The sonnet may be original. Sidney's "Whether the Turkish moon new minded be" and Spenser's "Most happy letters! framed by skillful trade" are localized by their allusions.

Second. It may be a direct translation of Petrarch. Lodge's twenty-fifth sonnet has thus been identified by Mr. Lee.

Third. It may be a mosaic of Petrarchan phrases. Professor Koeppel¹ has shown this to be the case with Sidney. Drayton's sixteenth sonnet is thus reminiscent of two of Petrarch's.

Fourth. It may be a direct translation or modification of an Italian imitator of Petrarch. Lodge's "Not causeless were you christened, gentle flowers" is so direct a translation from Ariosto that it has nothing original except the concluding couplet. Comically enough, as Lodge could not work in the name of the first flower, it is incomprehensible without a knowledge of the Italian. Spenser's "My love is like to ice, and I to fire" follows in the octave Cazza's "Se la mia donna è tutta neve, e ghiaccio." Fletcher's "A painter drew the image of a boy" simply takes the conceit of the sonnet attributed variously to Orcagna and to Burchiello.

Fifth. It may be taken from the French Petrarchists. Here Mr. Lee and Professor Kastner have done notable work.

But although thus deprived of their biographical rôle, these sonnets mark an important stage in our literature.

¹ Koeppel, E., *Studien zur Geschichte des englischen Petrarchismus, Romanische Forschungen*, 5.

From the rude and halting verse of Stephen Hawes, from the powerful doggerel of Skelton, it is a far cry to the mastery of language of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Spenser of the *Faerie Queene*. This transition is marked by the sonnets. The form is notoriously difficult, requiring all the resources of the language. Poor as some of these sonnets are, they are yet interesting as representing the trial stages of the art. Spenser's *Amoretti* are frigid and artificial, but without them he could never have attained the mastery of the Spenserian stanza. M. Michiels'¹ summary of the *Pléiade* is true here: "its true service is the advance which it made in the language and in versification; the style became more rich, the phrase more abundant, the period more numerous, the meter more varied." Thus whereas the 'prentice pieces of the modern poet never appear, those of the sixteenth century are not only preserved, but a fictitious biographical value is placed upon them. But they were not written to deceive. Watson labels his sources quite carefully. In general, it was assumed that every cultivated reader would recognize the translation from Desportes, Ronsard, or Ariosto. It is the misfortune of that age, and the double misfortune of our present-day studies, that we have forgotten the once admired originals. Consequently we treat these trifles too seriously, deduce from them facts that are untrue, use heavy words, such as plagiarism and theft, when the sixteenth-century poet was only doing his best to improve both himself and his mother tongue. *Petrarchismo* was but a literary fashion, and the Elizabethan sonnet-cycle but a necessary stage in the progress to the greatness of the Elizabethan age.

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¹ Alfred Michiels, *Oeuvres de Desportes*, 1858, p. xcii.